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Eloquence of the Psychological Trauma in Herta Muller's *The Hunger Angel*

Abstract: Trauma studies reflect the “real-world” issues such as history, politics, and ethics, usually visualized as irrelevant and indifferent. Psychoanalytical meanings of trauma summarize trauma as an event defined by its intensity, determined by subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it and by the long-lasting effects it leaves on the psychic life of the subject. Trauma narratives are based on the principle that remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims. The survivors of trauma often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner that undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. This article is an attempt to analyse the experience of trauma, exploring it through psychological perspectives, its obvious impacts, the way it becomes evident in a victim and the ways in which the trauma gets articulated in their lives. Herta Muller's *The Hunger Angel* serves as an excellent illustration for this study, as it implies the extreme impacts psychological trauma on its victim. The trauma's eloquence traverses beyond the boundaries of language, leaving behind a completely transformed individual, as Leopold Aue is, caught in a willing suspension of disbelief and incapable of comprehending the hazardous effects of trauma impacted on him.

Keywords: Trauma studies, Psychological trauma, Remembering and telling, Trauma's eloquence, Fragmented.

Literature has empowered language to display the inner world of man. There is a space for memories, introspection, retrospection, foreshadow, flashback and awful remembrances that are colored by pain, wound and trauma. Throughout its history there have been a host of oscillating and conflicting views on the reality and consequences of many types of psychological trauma. This psychological stance enables a focus on the total context in which narratives of trauma are formed and its prevalence, responsibility, consequences, and treatment of trauma.

The predominant epistemological focus of Trauma studies reflects the "real-world" issues such as history, politics, and ethics, usually visualized as irrelevant and indifferent. Trauma studies can with some justification be regarded as the reinvention in an ethical guise of this "textualist" paradigm. Cathy Caruth, one of the leading figures in trauma studies (along with Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra), counters the oft-heard critique of poststructuralism outlined above by arguing that, rather than leading us away from history and into "political and ethical paralysis" (Unclaimed 10), a textualist approach can afford us unique access to history. Indeed, it makes possible a "rethinking of reference," which aims not at "eliminating history" but at "resituating it in our understanding, that is, at permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not" (11). By bringing the insights of deconstructive and psychoanalytic scholarship to the analysis of cultural artifacts that bear witness to traumatic histories, critics can gain access to extreme events and experiences that defy understanding and representation.

'Trauma' has evolved from a Greek word *traumat* meaning 'wound', but with Freud it represents *traum* (dream). Robert Schumann's concept of *Traumerei* (Dreaming) applies to

‘traumata’ meaning the angry words from the ones you love, collisions with miscomprehension. Trauma has been defined to involve; physical trauma (resulting from serious injury or shock to the body through war, rape or illness) and emotional trauma/ psychological trauma resulting from our emotional wound or shock that creates emotional disturbances. Psychoanalytical meanings of trauma summarize trauma in the following terms: trauma is an event defined by its intensity, secondly it determines subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it and finally it leaves long-lasting effects on the psychic life of the subject. (Culture studies Blog 6 Aug 2009)

The usual response of trauma victims is to banish the memories of the incident from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact emerge out as unspeakable for it is too terrible to utter aloud and also refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims. The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived trauma often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner that undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom.

This article intends to analyse the experience of trauma exploring it through psychological perspectives, its obvious impacts, the way it becomes evident in a victim and the ways in which the trauma gets articulated in their lives. *The Hunger Angel*, a novel written by Herta Muller, (German-Romanian writer and Nobel Laureate 2009) has been chosen to unravel the psychological trauma of exile. The novel tells the story of a youth from Sibiu in Transylvania,

Leo Auberg, who is deported at the age of 17 to a Soviet forced labor concentration camp and spends five years of his life there. Theoretical concepts of Freud and Caruth have been employed for this analysis.

The trauma theory promotes a cultural investigation and prides itself on its explicit commitment to ethics. Cathy Caruth insists on the ethical significance of this critical practice as She claims that “the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand” a “new mode of reading and of listening” (9) that would allow us to pass out of the isolation imposed on both individuals and cultures by traumatic experience. Caruth remarks that in “a catastrophic age... trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (“Trauma” 11). Articulation of the trauma can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community by forming a bridge between disparate historical experiences.

The psychological distress symptoms of traumatized people simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it. This is most apparent in the way traumatized people alternate between feeling numb and reliving the event. The experience of trauma gives rise to complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness, which mental health professionals, searching for calm, precise language, call “dissociation.” It results in protean, dramatic, and often bizarre symptoms of hysteria which Freud recognized a century ago as disguised communications. . . .” (Herman)

For the last two hundred years, the representations of trauma have been viewed as remembrances of painful past. Many writers attempted to preserve personal and collective memories from assimilation, repression or misrepresentation, reflecting on the growing impact of the catastrophe and oppression on the individual’s psyche. Based on the nature of the traumatic experience- overwhelming, alien, amnesic and incomprehensible- the approaches and techniques needed for its explication too vary.

Trauma is a word applied at present to almost any severe disturbance, [and] comes from two sources: [t]he first emphasizes the closeness of the cause (traumatic incident) and effect (physical trauma).....over whelming power always produces the same effect, which is to turn you into a helpless subject – whether in domestic situations, war, or natural disasters (Hartman 3)

Freud claims in the Project that when “a memory is repressed” it “become a trauma by deferred action” (356). He sees memory as an affect which remains repressed and assumes a traumatic guise only when it is aroused a second time after it has become internally revived. He laid claims upon traumatic neurosis and traumatic hysteria as originating from psychical trauma and its memories and collectively accounts for it using a new term ‘traumatic hysteria’. Trauma merely acts like an ‘agent provocateur’ in releasing the symptom, which thereafter leads an independent existence...the psychical trauma- or more precisely the memory of the trauma, acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work (Freud and Breuer 6). Freud and Breuer states that the events become part of the individual’s memory and gets re-enacted only at a later time when they become confronted with a similar situation. This interval of latency is termed by Freud as “the incubation period” (131) and during this time the affect appears as somatic, psychopathological symptoms–“mnemic symbols”– symptoms evolving from the signals of the sealed traumatic memory (297). Freud’s theory finds its application at the level of recounting the events of the past and connecting it to the present by way of memory. In *The Hunger Angel*, it is the hunger-driven memories which contribute to mnemic symbols.

Trauma and its narrative representation are always regarded complementary to each other. Trauma involves a collapse of understanding and a shattering of the self, while their narrations aim at identity construction (Caruth 4). Trauma is crucial to the representation of the postmodern condition– centralizing the issues of the past concerning the marginal

communities, sense of rootlessness and the fluidity of existence. The unique representation of the constructed reality of trauma speaks for an exiled writer and Herta Müller is a writer who has competently worked out a combination of autobiography and fiction in her texts. Caruth feels that representation of trauma often fails to consider the insights of trauma proposed by Freud: “the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time.”(8-9). Dislocation of the traumatic experience intensifies the testimony to the event and the possibility of immediate direct access to it. Caruth’s theoretical concepts relating to trauma of exile is used to explicate *The Hunger Angel*.

The dislocation to the deportation camp with its constant tortures and sufferings serves as mnemonic symbols making its appearance after an incubation period. The hunger angel and the adverse conditions in the camp indicate the same. Leopold Aue, the protagonist of the novel *The Hunger Angel*, gives vent to his sufferings and torture offered by the camp life which discloses the impact of trauma:

No words are adequate for the suffering caused by hunger. To this day, I have to show the hunger that I escaped his (the hunger angel’s) grasp. Ever since I stopped having to go hungry, I literally eat life. And when I eat, I am locked up inside the taste of eating. For sixty years, ever since I came back from the camp, I have been eating against starvation. (18)

The indication given is that the unresolved past remains intact in the protagonist even after sixty years, similar to the hunger he had suffered in the camp, and this still continues to live with him. Leopold views that “the hunger angel climbs to the roof of my mouth and hangs his scales.... The hunger angel looks at his scales and says: you’re still not light enough for me: why don’t you just let go.” (77). In this way, the ‘hunger angel’ becomes a means of overcoming the feeling of hunger and an identification of something to blame for the hunger

experienced by everyone in the concentration camps. It is well evident from Caruth's theory that the traumatic event often expresses itself in its belatedness and continues to live in the victim binding his present and continuing into the future. Leopold's return doesn't alter his attitudes and he continues to behave as in a deportation camp. He is able to eat whatever he wants but the imprints left by the hunger angel is still with him which provides sharp contrasts to the habits of the other inhabitants of the house. His body, mind and behavior are still governed by the hunger angel. This is reflected in his eating habits even after he leaves the camp:

Even sixty years after the camp, eating still excites greatly. I eat with each pore of my body. When I eat with other people I become unpleasant I behave as though my way of eating were the only way. The others don't know mouth happiness, they eat sociably and politely. But when I eat, I think about the one drop too much happiness and how it will come to everyone (...) and we'll have to give up the nest in our skull, the swing in our breath, the pump in our chest, the waiting room in our stomach. I love eating too much that I don't want to die, because then I couldn't eat anymore.

(237)

At this point, Leopold's identity appears fragmented: he is neither the same in the present, nor as he was in the past. The self is both subject and object simultaneously. The 'subject' is often placed outside the self to take an objective observation of it. Leopold feels himself unfit to the position of both subject and object. The hunger angel has created cracks in his self and he is not able to identify his real self. In the beginning, eating was a means to an end- survival at the camp- but after his return this continues as he starts eating for the sake of eating. The trauma affected through hunger remains unrepaired and Leo develops a habit of eating as if to compensate the missed meals as prisoner and labourer at the camp. The burden of the memory,

of experiences at the camp, dominates him and ties him in its invisible chains forever. The loss caused due to trauma is irreparable and invades the person's life throughout.

The hysteric reactions, as proposed by Freud are seen pervading the labour camp in *The Hunger Angel*, itself is portrayed as a microcosm of psychic trauma and affects the physical and mental state of the inhabitants of the camp. The pathetic sight of the labourers fighting for food and the stealing of bread by Paul Gast from his wife's plate discloses "what the hunger angel could do to a marriage" and even dipping his spoon in her bowl for some soup which he did even without her knowledge (210). There is also another instance of Karli Halmen, another deportee in camp stealing Albert Gion's five little pieces of bread which he had steadfastly saved from each day's ration and had dreamt of eating it with the evening soup. The bread court executed its justice by dipping Karli Halmen in bucket of water and brutally torturing him. The torture episodes in the camp indicates both physical and psychic trauma

Leopold is aware of the fact that "the hunger angel is also a thief who steals the brain" when he accidentally comes across 10 rubbles and spends the whole amount over different varieties of food without thinking that his long starved stomach may not perhaps adjust to the situation (132). He later regrets having spent all the money and wasted all of it on the expensive food which his stomach cannot accommodate. The pathetic sight of his return with an empty stomach resound the trauma of hunger. People in the concentration camp overcome their trauma of hunger dreaming about the sumptuous meals.

The narrator reaches the peak of traumatic experience on receiving a letter from his mother with a baby's photograph accompanied by a name and date of birth and he is forced to think of his mother's disregard over his life in the camp, is an attempt at saying that she has had another baby and needs him no more. He is feeling at this moment is reflected in the following words:

I am always telling myself I don't have many feelings. Even when something does affect me I'm only moderately moved. I almost never cry.... When all you are is skin and bones, feelings are a brave thing. I'm more of a coward (180).

The narrator's long preserved burgundy silk scarf, along with his mother's unsentimental attitude attributes to intense trauma and dispossession along with the intense hunger invading him. "Where you're nothing but skin and bones and in bad shape yourself, you do what you can do to keep the dead at a distance." (79). The overpowering of trauma over the body gradually lets the labourers to seek for ways to resist it, which offers a way to survival. Leopold learns to eat smoke or smell, an imaginary eating which survived him from death

The Hunger Angel overflows with instances of hysterics represented through Leopold's initial homosexual behaviour contradicted later through his marriage, the insaneness of Kati Sentry and the dissolution of boundaries among the inmates of the camp, all of which argue to the same end of overcoming trauma, through what Freud calls the "talking cure." The 'hunger angel' symbolically leads to the dissolution of boundaries among Leopold and his fellow beings. The life of the outside world dissolves into the life in the camp.

To conclude, it can be stated that the experience of trauma creates strange perspectives in the life of the victims and leaves them in so worse a state of being from which a hopeful change seems impossible. The Hunger Angel, as a narrative of trauma, discloses prevalence, responsibility, consequences, and treatment of psychological trauma through a variety of conflicting instances. Ultimately, the impact of psychological trauma transcends the boundaries of retaining the victim in his normal state, and even makes him assume that he is nothing more than the transformed self.

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